

Thinking About Death from a Different Perspective Patristic Philosophy and Theology

Dinh Van Chien¹, Ta Van Tinh²

¹University of Social Sciences and Humanities - Viet Nam National University Ho Chi Minh City (USSH - VNUHCM) Vietnam

²Priest - Archdiocese of Ho Chi Minh City – Vietnam

ABSTRACT: “Church Fathers” is a meaningful term from the perspective of the Vietnamese language. Giao means to teach; Phu means father. Church Father means to consider a teacher as one's father; a respected teacher. When combining the word Church Father into the historical context of the Church during this period, we can understand that Church Father means clergy or lay people who are Christian authors of the early centuries, who perceived, developed, and disseminated theological treatises, had exemplary lives, and were recognized by the Church as Church Fathers. The period of the Church Fathers lasted from the second half of the first century to the eighth century. The ideological content of the Church Fathers was generally reflected in aspects of basic Church life such as: Defending the Christian faith; Communicating the Bible to Christians; Bringing fundamental creeds to the Church through the first General Councils; Establishing the basic structures of the Liturgy in the Church; Forming the structure of the sacred ministers: Bishops, Priests, Deacons.

KEYWORDS: General theory of death; Augustine's view of death.

Before going into this topic, we must clarify the term “Philosophy”. and the term “Theology”, from the perspective of the philosophers in the Patristic period. If “Philosophy” belongs to human reason and that reason proves a certain truth through its internal evidence in a direct or indirect form (the current understanding is that that knowledge is proven from scientific reasoning). Or philosophy is understood as the truth of reason. Then “Theology” belongs to human belief in God revealing the world (God's revelation to humans to perceive and explore that world), theology is the truth of faith.

General theory of death. So, what is death? Why is it that not only in the present stage but also throughout the history of human existence and development, when mentioned, everyone is so afraid and regretful? Will humans still exist after death? Why do humans want to find out the nature of death and why is human perception of death a concern for millennia of Theology and Philosophy? Here the author discusses the death of humans specifically, not the death of all things in general. The term “**death**” is usually considered from the perspective of “reason” Philosophy or “faith” Theology as the permanent cessation of all life activities (irreversible) in the body of a specific human being. However, in addition to that unity, the definition of death also depends on religious and philosophical perspectives. In Philosophy, death is the permanent cessation of all life activities such as respiration, metabolism or cell division and death occurs. In Theology, the concept of human death is somewhat unified as in Philosophy. However, the only difference in Theology's concept of human is the union between body and soul. When death occurs, the soul will leave the body.

Death in “rational” philosophy. First of all, we must understand from the perspective of the general movement of matter as constantly changing. Humans are also matter, also subject to the general law of movement and change. A person who is living happily and healthily suddenly falls over, struggles a few times, then lies motionless. Touching the person, feeling that the heart is no longer beating, no longer breathing, we say that person has just died. Dead! because the parts of the body are not functioning “unrelated” to each other. However, looking from the perspective of reason to examine the movement of things, of course, after death, the human body moves to a new thing, taking on a new (material) form. From there, death is also understood to not mean the end, the cessation of existence.

The natural world is a unity but when life is separated out of nature in isolation, metaphysics is nature and life are different. Life separated from nature, the rest of nature is death. Nature is the same, there is no distinction, but movement and change make life and death different. The transformation between life and death is in the means and purpose in the process of differentiation. Life is the purpose, death is the means, and death is the purpose, life is the means. Life and death are objects of each other in a whole. Life is all, death is To be lost socks chief should Are not Have What to lost. Are not Have What to lost To be nothing to enjoy after death

Thinking About Death from a Different Perspective Patristic Philosophy and Theology

In history as well as today, many scientists have studied death based on the theory of "reason". Among them, Dr. Sean Carroll's point of view is highly appreciated by many rational scientists. According to the New Zealand Herald, Dr. Sean Carroll, a cosmologist and professor of physics at the California Institute of Technology (USA), has spent many years researching life after death and he firmly believes that there is no life after we close our eyes. He pointed out that life after death can be seen as a possibility, consciousness will need to be completely separated from the body. However, as we know, consciousness is actually made up of a series of atoms and electrons and therefore cannot be separated from the physical world. "Claims that some form of consciousness remains after our body dies and decomposes into its constituent atoms face a major insurmountable obstacle".

Dr. Carroll wrote in Scientific American. And: "Within the QFT framework, there cannot be a set of "soul particles" and "soul forces" that interact with our ordinary atoms, because if there were, we would have detected them in our existing experiments." Thus, the "rational" philosophical view of death is synonymous with the cessation of life in the human body, which is also understood as the absence of a soul separate from the body.

According to C.Marx and F.Engels, man is the highest product of nature. He believes that: "nature (...) is the inorganic body of man" [15.p.135], the result of material evolution, "the most complex body that nature can produce" [16.p.475]. In this sense, man is first of all a part of nature. Therefore, man has full biological nature, species nature and has no soul. On the other hand, man is not passive before nature, but on the contrary, "man also acts on nature, transforms nature and creates new conditions for his own survival" [16.p.720]. Man's impact on nature increases gradually according to his own needs and awareness of his own living and existing conditions. And in man there is always unity, and of course death and life always exist in man, this death is explained as in man new substance is always born and old substance always dies. However, death is general meaning that the parts in man do not function, death appears and the body decays. The human body changes into a new thing.

Death from the perspective of theologians. When discussing the origin of death, theologians agree: Saint Paul in his letter to the Romans demonstrated death as a consequence of sin: "Through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin; and so death spread to all men, because all sinned" [Rom 5:12].

So do God and Jesus Christ (the Son of God) want humans to die? My answer is no. Because in the theory of creation, right from the beginning of the universe and of course with humans, God did not want humans to die, but only wanted humans to live in eternal happiness. In Genesis 2:7, Adam carries the idea of the first man, the person created by God and belongs to the most noble children of God. In the Bible, Adam is also mentioned as God's masterpiece: God molded Adam from clay and breathed life into them in the final chapter of the theory of creation. In the first chapter of Genesis, God's "promise and blessing" to Adam and Eve. The promise from God is to give Adam and Eve **the freedom to choose**. If they obey God, they will have eternal happiness, otherwise they will die.

God promised to confirm Adam in a state of eternal life and happiness from Him, described in the Bible as follows: "And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them; and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be with them, and shall be their God. And God shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither shall there be sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain, for the former things have passed away.'" [Revelation 21:3-4]. In response, God made demands on Adam to love, trust, and obey God. This included specifically not eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He attached a death curse to breaking His word [Genesis 1:26-28; 2:15-17]. From the above "promise and blessing", we see for sure that God does not want people to disobey Him, which means that God does not want people to die.

However, it was not as God expected when Adam and Eve committed the sin of disobedience by "eating the forbidden fruit", death appeared. Through that, death appeared from the rift between man and God, an imperfection and became a destiny that man had to accept. Therefore, that death was chosen by man (our ancestors). Because God did not create death, nor did He rejoice in seeing living things die. He created them to exist [see Gen 1:13-14]. In the book of Kings, when the prophet Elisha came to Sarepta, he met a widow who gave him food. Later, her child died suddenly. Elisha begged God to return the child to her: Three times he laid himself on the child and begged God, "O Lord, my God, I beg you, please restore this child to life!", God heard his prayer; The child's breath returned to him and he lived! [1 Kings 17:21-22].

Thus, death is not God's intention. However, it is man's choice and since our ancestors sinned, man cannot save himself from death. Man seems helpless and deadlocked before his fate of death. It was at this moment that God intervened, He promised, fulfilled through covenants with man and especially He sent His only Son to the world to reverse the tragic situation for man. Jesus, the Son of God, took on human death and conquered death through resurrection. Christ brought a new hope to man: through death, through Christ, they will also be resurrected to meet God forever. For the Christian faith, death is a failure but also a victory, a breakdown but also a fulfillment; death ends earthly life but is also the path to eternal life.

Although Christ has conquered death. So is Jesus afraid of death? **According to the author, yes.** Because, Jesus understands better than anyone, death is sadness, is suffering. During the 33 years of being human, Jesus went around preaching and performing miracles, showing us specific events such as the miracle of bringing the dead back to life: The head of the Jewish synagogue came to ask Jesus to save his dying daughter. When they arrived, the child was dead, but Jesus did not let them grieve: "Everyone was

Thinking About Death from a Different Perspective Patristic Philosophy and Theology

weeping for the child. But Jesus said: 'Do not weep; the child is not dead, but sleeping'. But they laughed at him, knowing that she was dead. Then he took her by the hand and said: 'Little girl, arise!'. The spirit of the child returned and she stood up immediately. Jesus told them to give her something to eat" [Luke 8:52-55].

The Gospel of Luke also recounts that Jesus, while passing through the city of Nain, saw a group of people carrying a dead man out for burial. The man was the only son of a widow. When Jesus saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, "Do not weep!" Then he approached and touched the bier; the bearers stood still and Jesus said, "Young man, I say to you, arise!" The dead man stood up and began to talk. Jesus gave him back to his mother [Luke 7:13-15]. It is also the most famous resurrection miracle in the Bible, Lazarus of Bethany was the brother of Martha and Mary. It was Jesus who called Lazarus back to life after he had been dead for four days, as Saint John recounts: "He cried out with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unwrap him and let him go.' " [John, 43-44]. Jesus himself **was afraid of death**. Before dying on the Cross, Jesus was recorded in Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?". In the Bible, Luke 22:42 says: "Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me. Yet not my will, but yours be done."

From the events of miracles as well as in the depths of Jesus' soul before his death, he also feared death. Therefore, death is a common fear of all mankind, without exception, and although people all know that death is unavoidable.

So how does God save people? Perhaps, more convincingly, God redeems from the perspective of the human **soul** after death exists. Those who believe in Him, follow His laws, teachings... or in short, live **the truth** according to His will will have a new life in His Son. Because:

"The truth will set you free" [John 8:32].

That is true liberation, that is true liberation. Truth is truth.

Augustine's basic thoughts on death: When talking about death in the Patristic period, many theologians discussed death. However, the author only discusses Augustine's basic thoughts on death. Because Augustine is considered the most typical Father of the Church, he is not only a theologian but also a philosopher with much influence in Western Christianity and Western philosophy. He is recognized as a Saint by most churches and was declared a Doctor of the Church by the Roman Catholic Church. His thoughts bear the mark of a person highly educated in literature and rhetoric and are reflected in three famous books: Confessions, The City of God, on the Trinity. The most profound and honest reflection on death is expressed in the work The City of God, the thirteenth book - Reason.

Like many other theologians, Augustine considered that **the origin of death** in the first man's fall refers to Adam and Eve. Augustine writes: "**The** natural order of our world and the beginning of the human race requires that we now discuss the fall of the first man (Adam, Eve), and the origin and propagation of human death. For God did not create men like the angels, in a condition in which, although they had sinned, they could no longer die. He created them so, that if they fulfilled the duties of obedience, an angelic immortality and a blessed eternity might occur, without the intervention of death; but if they disobeyed, death would come upon them with just judgment" [14, argument]. Therefore, the origin from the first transgression is a seed of death.

Augustine argues that God created the first man with a nature, without vice, and created him upright; but man, by his own will, his freedom was corrupted, and was justly condemned, and brought forth corrupted and condemned children. For we are all in that one man, since we are all one man who fell into sin through the woman who was created from him before sin. For the concrete form was not yet created and distributed to us, in which we as individuals would live, but the essential nature was already there [14, argument]. Through it man was born, and this nature was corrupted by sin, and bound by the chains of death. And thus, from the misuse of free will, there arose the whole chain of evil, together with its chain of suffering, which leads mankind from its depraved origin, from a corrupt root, to the destruction of the second death, without end, except only for those who are freed by the grace of God.

Thus, the first punishment of God upon the first man, Adam and Eve, was death. For as soon as our first parents broke the covenant, divine grace abandoned Adam and Eve, and Adam and Eve were embarrassed by their own disobedience. Therefore, they took fig leaves (which were probably the first thing that came to their confused state of mind), and covered their shame, although the image of their bodies remained the same, but now they had shame where they had not had it before. They experienced a new movement of the flesh and soul. Although severely punished, the spirit still retained its liberty and freedom. And it was from the liberty and freedom of the soul that the body continued to sin, although God had made a new promise and a new blessing to bring the soul back to Him.

On the nature of death. Although the human soul is indeed affirmed to be immortal, it has also a certain death of its own. Thus it is called immortal in the sense that it does not cease to live and feel; whereas the body is called mortal, because it can be deprived of all life, and cannot itself live. Therefore, **the first death for the sake of the truth, is delivered from the second death**. For if we consider this matter a little more closely, we shall see that even if a man dies a **martyr's death**, that is, a faithful and praiseworthy death for the sake of the truth, it is still a death which he is avoiding. For he suffers a part of death, for the main purpose is to avoid the whole, and the second and more eternal death. He suffers the separation of soul and body, and the whole of the first death is

Thinking About Death from a Different Perspective Patristic Philosophy and Theology

accomplished, and the second death takes him over forever. Therefore, as I have said, death is not really good for anyone while it is actually endured, and while it is subjecting the dying person to its power; but it is worthily endured for the sake of retaining or acquiring good. And as for what happens after death, it is not unreasonable to say that death is good for the good, and bad for the bad. For the disembodied souls of the righteous are at rest; but the wicked are punished until the resurrection of their bodies, the righteous to eternal life, and the rest to eternal death, which is called the second death.

By this, the first death and the second death, we can say that for good people it is good, and for bad people it is bad. But certainly, the second death does not happen to any good person. By this, Augustine affirms that death is **the separation of the soul from the body** and that death does not exclude anyone, even if that person has been forgiven by the grace of regeneration.

Why then is it that the just and the wicked are always in pain at the moment of death? Augustine argues that: In the first stage of death the body suffers pain. For **the violence by which the body and soul**, which were so closely united and interwoven during life, are torn apart, brings with it a harsh, shocking experience when the dying man (near death), until he loses all sense. And all this pain and agony are sometimes caused by a blow of the body or a sudden passing of the soul, the swiftness of which prevents it from being felt. But whatever may happen in death, with a feeling of intense pain, robs all sense. However, if it is suffered for righteousness, it becomes glory for those who are reborn; and that death is the reward of the righteous.

So, what causes violence between the body and the soul? According to the author of this article, it is because from the beginning God gave man (the first person) a soul and a body united in harmony. However, the soul is always dynamic, always longing for freedom and the soul controls the movement of the body. Because the soul is the part that controls the body, if there were no soul, the body would probably move naturally and it is the soul that makes people flexible through actions according to their will. And it is also the soul that carries on itself the task and function of realizing freedom in the body (the soul always desires lust, desires wealth, desires honor...). In the unified existence between the body and the soul, the soul often does not satisfy its needs. Therefore, when the body has limitations such as physical, health... then the soul does not want to be in unity with the body anymore. Because the desires of the soul never satisfy the soul's needs and desires for freedom. From there, the soul wants to separate to find new freedom. So is the freedom of each soul different? If there is freedom in each soul, then of course there is a difference, the difference is shown in two basic aspects: the souls choose good and the freedom to choose evil during the time of soul and body union (concrete living human). That is, when the soul dies, it will be separated between the world of good souls and the world of evil souls.

So then, does the body that is sown after death decay in the sense of its permanent disappearance? The soul of the virtuous departed is not affected by death, which separates it from the body, for its flesh still has hope, despite the humiliations it endures after the disappearance of sensation. Since it does not want its body to be forgotten, since it remembers what has been promised by Him who deceives no one, and has given it the guarantee of keeping safe even the hairs of its head, it patiently waits in hope for the resurrection of the body, which it has suffered so much, and now will never have to suffer again. In (1 Cor 15:42-53) it is written: "What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable...the dead will be raised incorruptible...For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality."

So will our bodies return to the same state as when we were alive? According to Augustine, everyone will be resurrected with their bodies, but these bodies will be transformed into glorious, spiritual bodies.

There is no one in us who "hates his own flesh," for when the human body, with its natural weakness, is subject to the spiritual law, how much more shall we love it, when it itself becomes spiritual! For when the Soul serves the flesh, it is rightly called flesh, so when the flesh serves the Soul, it will rightly be called spirit. Not that it is transformed into spirit, as some imagine from the words, "It is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption," but because it submits to the Soul with perfect and wonderful obedience, and responds in all things to the will which has entered into immortality, all reluctance, all corruption, and all sluggishness are removed. For the body will not only be better than it was here in its best state of health, but it will surpass the body of our First Parents before they sinned. Before sin, our First Parents still used food as men do now, their bodies were not yet spiritual, but merely animal. And although they did not decay with age, nor did they die, a condition guaranteed to them in the wonderful grace of God through the tree of life, which grew together with the forbidden tree in the midst of Paradise. Yet our First Parents took other food, that of the forbidden tree. The tree itself was forbidden not because it was bad in itself, but for the purpose of praising the pure and simple obedience, which is the great virtue of the rational creature placed under its Creator and Lord.

In the presence of such good, although no evil is touched, if a forbidden thing is touched, then disobedience itself is sin. Then the Fathers were nourished by other fruits, which they ate to sustain their animal bodies from suffering the discomforts of hunger or thirst; but the Fathers tasted the tree of life, so that death could not steal them from any direction, and so that the Fathers would not weaken with age, and be corrupted. Other fruits, so to speak, were their food, but this was their sacrament. So the tree of life seems to have been in Paradise on earth as the wisdom of God is in the spirit, of which it is written: "It is a tree of life to those who take hold of it."

In short, when discussing death, there are many different views. However, in general, from the perspective of "reason" and "faith" or in other words, from "Philosophy" and "Theology" there are different views. Anyway, the article also gives us a multi-dimensional

Thinking About Death from a Different Perspective Patristic Philosophy and Theology

view of death that actually exists in humans. So that each of us can perceive it and help us to be more steadfast when facing death, which is inevitable in each of us.

REFERENCES

- 1) Tran Phuc Nhan, Understanding the Old Testament c.
- 2) Neal M. Flanagan, osm, Salvation History, Introduction to Biblical Theology.
- 3) J. Dheilly Desclee, Bible Dictionary – Part II (from DJ).
- 4) Nguyen Dac Anh, Salvation History
- 5) Father Nguyen The Thuan, Bible – Translation. Publishing House , Press Department. 1976.
- 6) Neal M. Flanagan, Salvation History: Introduction to Biblical Theology.
- 7) Father Francois Viet. History of Salvation .
- 8) C.Marx and F.Engels: Complete Works, Vol.42, National Political Publishing House Truth, Ha noi, 2000.
- 9) C.Marx and F.Engels: Complete Works, Vol. 20, National Political Publishing House Truth, Ha noi, 2002.
- 10) Minns, Denis, & Paul Parvis. Justin, Philosopher and Martyr: Apologies. Edited by Henry Chadwick, Oxford Early Christian Texts. Oxford: OUP, 2009.
- 11) Aurelius Augustine, The City of God, Book Thirteen - Reasoning. Reverend Marcus Dods, Ma.
- 12) Dinh Van Chien (2024) Moral thought in the wise speaker of qohelet king of jerusalem .
<https://www.ijsshrm.com/v3i11/Doc/9.pdf>
- 13) Dinh Van Chien (2024) Humanistic thought in jesus' sermon on the eight beatens.
https://www.pjls.edu.pk/pdf_files/2024_2/15165-15170.pdf
- 14) Dinh Van Chien (2024) Moral thought in the wise speaker of qohelet king of Jerusalem
<https://www.ijsshrm.com/v3i11/Doc/9.pdf>